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Women (re)construct the plot: the regen(d)eration of urban food growing

Susan Buckingham
Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH
Email: susan.buckingham@brunel.ac.uk

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The British allotment is in the process of transformation. From a traditional provision made to male active and retired workers, it is becoming, by degrees, embourgeoised and more socially diverse, with many more women entering allotment gardening. At the same time, growing community gardening activity is giving women in low income families the opportunity to provide fresh, and culturally relevant, food for their families. This paper explores the meaning of this gradual gender transformation of urban food-growing spaces with regard to its social, aesthetic and environmental impact and looks at the implications of this both on and off the plot.

Key words: *allotments, environment, gender, gender roles, urban food growing*

Prologue

A few years ago, as an escape from a largely sedentary academic occupation, I timidly entered the world of 'the allotment'.[1] I was first spurred by a Local Agenda 21 meeting at the London Borough of Southwark at which I had been invited to speak to women about engaging in the process of planning for a more sustainable environment. To close the meeting, we were all asked what ONE thing we would do, to try to achieve this. Inspired by discussions of organic food growing, I committed myself to renting a few rods (as the land is archaically measured). Although a gardening novice, I was encouraged by a local woman's account of her own venture into plot-holding, and, seven years on, I am no less impressed by the decorative and utilitarian plants she teased out of her plot (Kilbride 1997). Without elaborating on my minor achievements and myriad disappointments, I became fascinated by the hybridity of allotment society, the ease of social and material exchange and its quiet unconventionality. It was a place where people were respected and valued for their horticultural skills and where the usual hierarchy of wealth and profession was overturned. My neighbours included an elderly man reliant on his state pension, an airline pilot, a medical doctor and a retired engineer who had migrated from Turkey many years ago (but fostered its memory under glass in the shape of the most regal aubergines). All men. But what surprised me even more were my female neighbours, for I had believed that the allotment was a male stronghold to which wives and daughters were admitted to help on occasion: the single mother who brought her adolescent son along to help with the gardening in return for summer barbecues; the elderly woman who I had seen often in the 'world outside' and had assumed was an itinerant bag lady; and the anti (Heathrow) Terminal 5 campaigner. The 'Two Julias' (for I never discovered the name of the 'bag lady') astounded me with their profusion of herbs, sweet peas, roses, fruit trees and vegetables – with not a straight line in sight – and impressed on me the difference between the plots tended by the men and those by the women. Thus was my attempt at escape from academia attenuated by an intellectual interest in

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women's role in the shaping of the contemporary British Allotment.

Context and aims of research

The research on which this article is based is drawn from a number of allotment use surveys undertaken in West London, a questionnaire administered for this researcher by one West London borough, in-depth interviews with women allotment holders, media reports and personal observations. The research was undertaken between Spring 2001 and Spring 2002 in the London boroughs of Hillingdon, Hounslow and Richmond-upon-Thames, each of which had conducted a survey of their allotment holders from which it was possible to extract data on age, sex and ethnicity.[2] The data from the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is based on a response rate of 66.4 per cent (465 out of 700), and that from the London Borough of Hillingdon on a response rate of 20.8 per cent (131 of 630). In exchange for access to raw data and the permission to contact allotment holders, I analysed the 2001 survey of allotment holders undertaken by the London Borough of Hounslow, which yielded 461 responses (40.3% response rate of 1144 allotment holders contacted). The London Borough of Hounslow also agreed to administer a five-page questionnaire (using a mix of open-ended and closed questions) to representatives of allotment societies (which interface between the allotment holders and the local authority) on this researcher's behalf, which asked questions on gardening practices as well as on personal attitudes. Twelve out of a possible 34 participated. Interviews were held with seven women allotment holders in two of the boroughs (Hounslow and Richmond) which were conducted on the allotment, with the plot holder talking (and walking) the researcher through her gardening methods and production. This style of interviewing made it inappropriate to tape record interviews, although notes were taken at the time of the interview and immediately afterwards. Responses were categorized and analysed by produce grown, inputs used, relationships with other plot holders, impact of holding an allotment on domestic life, environmental attitudes and personal details. Finally a number of articles from 'home/garden' and fashion magazines from 1999 to 2002 were examined for their portrayal of and changes in the allotment.

Using findings from these sources, the main aim of this paper is to explore the 'feminization' of the allotment, both in terms of the changing gender balance of plot holders, and what this might mean in terms of what is grown, how it is grown and what the implications of this are both within and beyond the allotment, both for urban food growing and the environment more generally. A second aim is to examine how far the allotment is a contemporary site for the reworking of gender roles and whether the increase in the number and percentage of women allotment holders is having an impact not only on the allotment society, space and aesthetic, but also on its environmental management. Key to this is what motivates women (as opposed to men) to get involved in food growing. What is revealed through this research is that women plot holders are much more likely to be growing food to ensure that it is free of artificial chemicals and using environmentally sustainable practices. It also appears that the site of the allotment is undergoing an embourgeoisement, which is linked to its increasing feminization, with most of the women gardeners coming from a class or educational background not typical of older, or earlier, plot holders (also borne out by research undertaken by the NSALG 2004). This is likely to have an impact on how gender roles are negotiated. Interestingly, whilst recent public attitudes surveys have revealed more concern about environmental issues by those with O levels, A levels or no qualifications, compared with those with degrees, women consistently reveal greater concerns than men (men expressed greater concern in only two out of 31 issues in 1998 and in only one out of 20 in 2002) (Her Majesty's Government 1998; Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs 2002). In parallel, however, it is important to note that there is a move to the development of urban community gardens in the UK (a practice more common in North America, see, for example, Roseland 1998; Irvine *et al.* 1999) which are designed to provide food-growing opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Whilst this paper later briefly discusses the role that women play in such community gardens, more detailed research here remains to be done (although see Buckingham 2003).

It has been noted repeatedly in studies of women's participation in environmental decisionmaking that women are less visible in formal decisionmaking structures and most active in grass roots, community-based activities (see, for example, Horelli and Vepsa (1994) for examples in Scandinavia, and Seager (1993) for examples in North America). This author's research into women's participation in Local Agenda 21 in the UK has demonstrated that far from showing

a lack of interest in environmental concerns, women have absented themselves from local government-based Local Agenda 21 debates because they see them as largely irrelevant or unfocused (Buckingham-Hatfield 1999). Rather, when asked to describe their environmental and community activities and commitments, overwhelmingly women cited a number of focused and issue-specific activities they were active in.

Bhatti and Church (2000) have written about the way in which the garden (an extension of the 'private' and 'domestic' space of the home) is a place in which gender relations can be re-negotiated as well as reinforced. The allotment, whilst in some ways an extension of the garden, and partly private since it is rented exclusively by an individual, is also public in that it is a more exposed space and has imposed on it a set of rules and regulations. Layered over these formal controls are the customs and practices of generations of allotment holders, dominated by a particular gender and class group. Breaking into this space and transgressing its informal customs exposes a process of social change which challenges these customs, practices and previous gender relations. This combination of the public and private makes the allotment an interesting space to explore (changing) gender roles and how these have an impact on the space itself.

The analysis will proceed broadly within the context of a feminist political ecology, following Rochelieu *et al.* (1996), in terms of explaining how gender is shaping processes of ecological change in these small urban food gardens. Although my main focus is the individual woman allotment holder who, mainly white, well-educated, independent and middle class, is increasingly a common site on British allotments, this will be juxtaposed with a parallel development in which low income, family-bound and more likely minority ethnic women, are becoming actively involved in community food gardening. Whilst the available evidence suggests that the main motivation for these gardeners is poverty mitigation, reports of these projects indicate a number of unexpected outcomes (Rycroft 2000; Buckingham 2003), which suggests that both the allotment and community garden are providing the *'mise en scene'* in which gender roles are being reconfigured, for example by enabling more women to undertake food gardening in a more independent and self-directed way than traditionally associated gendered food gardening practices, either historically or in non-Western countries. The analysis concludes that the increase in women allotment holders and community gardeners effectively both reinforces and challenges gender stereotyping in myriad and complex ways.

Allotments: from working man's refuge to 'one woman's plot'

In England and Wales, allotments were primarily a response to land enclosures in the seventeenth century and related rural to urban migration. Crouch and Ward's definitive book *The Allotment* charts the provision of small plots of urban land to households who would otherwise have lost the ability to provide their own food (Crouch and Ward 1997). Vestiges of this social provision can be found in the modest rents (commonly around £20 per year) and the statutory obligation most local authorities have to provide allotments. Historically, the allotment, local to, but set apart from the home, was male territory, although wives and children may have helped with the weeding and harvesting . . . and provided refreshment: 'women are better at bringing flasks of tea for their husbands than trying to dig'.[3]

Allotments have entered twentieth-century popular history through their role in food provision during the Second World War and the 'Dig for Victory' campaign, which required all open spaces (including private gardens and school grounds) to be given over to food growing, since food imports were impossible. In fact, the Second World War provided a six-year window during which women became much more involved in food growing both in agriculture (in which The Women's Land Army[4] placed more than 6000 women on farms to keep agriculture going) and in allotments. However, as with a range of occupations at the end of the Second World War, as the armed forces were demobilized, the division of gender roles in the field and garden reverted to pre-war patterns. As one of the male respondents in the Hounslow survey indicated, 'the wife and mother worked [the allotment] during the war years – I took over after release from Army life in 1946'.

By the late 1960s, 96.8 per cent of allotment holders were men, and most were elderly and on low incomes, characterizing allotment gardening as a minority occupation for the elderly poor, or as a retreat 'from the wife and children' as one man quoted in the Thorpe Report put it (Her Majesty's Government 1969).

However, by 1993, the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG) members' survey

established that 15 per cent of their members were women, and by 2001, when the data reported in this paper were collected, proportions of women in some London boroughs were significantly higher. (Of surveys conducted in the London boroughs of Hounslow and Richmond, the proportion of women respondents was 34% and 41%, respectively.)

Of course, women are not at all new to growing plants in England and Wales. If anything, the post-enclosure domination of men as prime food growers in the UK is anomalous, especially at the subsistence level. As Susan Groag Bell suggests, it was in the eighteenth century that women became inconspicuous in the gardens, even the kitchen gardens, of the wealthy. Previously, women in medieval times had a prominent role in the cultivation of plants for food, medicines and dyes, and although in the nineteenth century women were encouraged to garden to abate the 'blight of urbanisation', with the occasional notable exception, they have never achieved parity with male gardeners since (Groag Bell 1990). Christine Dann writes of New Zealand gardeners in the early to mid-twentieth century as having strong and gendered demarcations between the male back garden in which the vegetables were grown, and the female flower garden at the front. She notes that most female vegetable gardeners are from 'the women's liberation generation in their forties or younger' (Dann 1992, 244). In the UK, the twentieth-century garden has largely been seen as 'man's domain' through which women navigate on their partner's or father's terms – allowed limited access into a masculine source of relaxation and pleasure (Bhatti and Church 2000). Bhatti and Church quote Olechnowicz commenting on twentieth-century Essex housing-estate gardening practice which 'makes family life possible; while the father gardens, the children play, the mother does the housework' (Olechnowicz 1997, 210 in Bhatti and Church 2000).

As much of the feminist political ecology literature indicates, gardening practice is often the reverse of this in the Third World, where women are generally dominant in subsistence food growing. However, there seems to be some evidence that as societies become more urbanized this may be changing, as King Bruins (2002) illustrates in China. Moreover, Susanne Freidberg's study of urban gardening in Bobo Diassolou in Burkina Faso explains how this mostly masculine enterprise has been culturally and historically conditioned (Freidberg 2001a 2001b). Equally, the gendering of food growing in the United Kingdom has been subject to broader social and economic social processes which have led to food growing being seen and experienced as a 'masculinist' practice in industrialized Britain (with the exception of World War Two, as indicated above). What is it, then, about turn-of-the-millennium urban Britain which appears to be stimulating a significant shift towards women as urban subsistence food growers?

Women food growers

Since the mid to late 1990s, a number of fashion, feature and home style magazines have reported the rise of women plot holders or espoused a particular 'allotment aesthetic', presumably judging their market audience to be increasingly interested in such features.[5] As well as the quantitative growth noted above, what these articles promote, and this is borne out by the qualitative research in West London, is the different approach used to food growing by women gardeners, in terms of produce grown, inputs used and practices employed. For example: '[Amanda has] now planted 5 different types of lettuce, courgettes, peas and runner beans' (Geddes-Brown 2001) whilst Lizzy 'grow[s] ruby chard because it looks and tastes good . . . as well as basil, marjoram and mint' (Gifford 1999).

This morphological difference is well described in New Zealand, where Dann quotes a woman gardener describing her grandparents' respective plots, where the grandfather's

> territory was the extreme of neatness, everything in mathematical rows, in plots of strictly equal size, dissected by parallel paths between, and not a leaf out of place . . . it was all controlled and precise.

Conversely,

> grandma's ideas of gardening were completely the reverse . . . She would amble about poking in the soil, stirring things with her little spade . . . she had no plan, no system, no order at all. But the strange thing was, everything grew. (1992, 242)

As well as distinctive produce and aesthetics, the way in which produce is grown appears to have a gendered dimension. Interviews with women allotment holders in West London suggest that the women who garden are less likely to follow the accepted 'science' of domestic food growing. For example, one woman interviewee challenged 'double digging' (a

practice recommended in gardening manuals which overturns topsoil two spadefuls deep, but considered by the interviewee as disruptive of topsoil and unnecessary). In a survey, conducted by the author of allotment representatives in Hounslow, West London, women respondents invariably 'never' or 'rarely' used chemicals, whilst men 'sometimes' or 'regularly' used them. The president of NSALG believed that women 'want to be more organic, more in control of what goes on' (Geddes-Brown 2001). The article goes on to quote women interviewees as to why they choose not to use artificial chemicals, which included suspicion of 'designer food and kamikaze seeds', dislike of the uniformity of supermarket produce, and for taste (Geddes-Brown 2001, 36–9). The women interviewed for this research claimed only to use chemicals in extremis, and reluctantly (notably to control plagues of whitefly and slugs) and widely practised composting. Ms G (Hounslow), for example, 'never uses chemical pesticides or fertilisers', but 'composts and grows companion plants . . . and buys seeds from an organic catalogue'.

As more women, then, participate in allotment gardening, and grow more produce without recourse to artificial chemicals, there is likely to be a move towards greater urban biodiversity.

In addition to different gardening approaches, aesthetics and principles, contemporary women allotment holders in England appear to have different expectations of gardening, much of which can be attributed to their role as prime household carer and educator. Women allotment holders are more likely to involve their children in plot tending, such that Mrs H (Hounslow) feels that: 'It is an enjoyable hobby for me and my children which is also educational and provides an economical source of fruit and vegetables.' Ms W (Hounslow) takes her children 'to [my allotment] who have been stunned to see potatoes coming out of the ground'.

As well as gardening with children, women are also more likely to garden with friends and less likely to do so with partners, one respondent quoted in *You Magazine* as complaining that her male partner only comes down to the allotment to enjoy some sunbathing. The same article suggests that demand for allotments is 'coming from women, often young women with babies, wanting to grow their own organic fruit and veg' (Geddes-Brown 2001, 36).

How far this suggests a consistently gendered cultivation pattern is open to question and needs further research, but it suggests possible social and environmental implications, which this paper will now address.

Implications of change on the plot

Back in 1969, when the UK Government appointed Professor Thorpe to investigate possible responses to the declining use of allotments, his report suggested that women might be discouraged from using them because of a lack of facilities (by which he meant toilets and the absence of social activity). Interviews and a review of the popular media suggests that this has not put off the increasing number of women who have taken up allotment gardening, but analysis of the questionnaire responses suggests that the 'general air of dereliction' Thorpe noted (Crouch and Ward 1997) may act as a considerable deterrent, and may have the effect of putting off potential allotment holders. Typically, there has been little improvement in many allotment sites, many of which still have no running water (hence no toilets), or communal facilities. Women interviewed have suggested that a lack of security, the need for heavy clearing work before a new plot is usable, and the letting of standard size plots (which can be seen as too large and offputting) are all more discouraging than the issues Thorpe identified.

An analysis of questionnaires sent to (male and female) allotment representatives in the London Borough of Hounslow reveals the main concerns to be a lack of water provision, security and waste clearance, with suggestions that common parts and vacant plots should be better maintained, or more swiftly re-let and that rubbish should be cleared or discouraged.

Although men have, on occasion, been disparaging towards women allotment holders: 'women can't grow vegetables, only flowers' and 'women shouldn't have allotments because they won't work them during their menstrual cycle' [sic] (Nottingham survey[6]), on the whole, women plot holders have found their male neighbours to be supportive – offering help with 'really heavy work' and 'old timers offering help and advice' (Mrs B1, Hounslow). Interviews identified some perceived initial scepticism by male allotment holders of women gardeners in being able to manage the plot, expecting them to give up after a short while. Subsequently, however, women interviewees reported finding their male neighbours helpful, even if they did sometimes get the impression that the men 'thought they knew it all' (Ms B2, Hounslow).[7] Indeed, the survey of Hounslow

allotment representatives revealed that some male respondents were pleased that the upswing in the number of women taking up allotments was reducing the number of neglected plots.

In the plots in which the qualitative work discussed above has been undertaken, there is considerable evidence that allotments are in the process of embourgeoisment, a kind of vegetable variant of gentrification. As reported above, annual government surveys suggest that higher levels of education are no longer necessarily a major determinant of environmental concern, so the consistently greater environmental concern expressed by women does not appear to be directly related to the wider embourgeoisment of the allotment. In the boroughs under study, and nationally, the percentage of older plot holders remains high. Eighty per cent of plot holders in Richmond upon Thames are over 45, 60 per cent of plot holders in Hillingdon are retired and 65 per cent of plot holders surveyed by NSALG are over 50. Whilst there remains more research to be done on this, given that the majority of older plot holders are men, the substantial numbers of women (see Table 1) taking on plots indicates that women form a disproportionately high number of younger plot holders.

There is significant published evidence to suggest that it is not exclusively professional, well-educated, middle class women who are making incursions into food growing in allotment gardening. This can be seen from a number of food growing projects on and off the allotment.

Another way of using derelict allotment space (and other derelict open spaces) has been the creation of communally worked groups of plots. In particular, this is beginning to be used by schools on environmental education projects, but also by women's groups, when women might find taking on a whole allotment plot overwhelming or intimidating.[8] In particular, The Women's Environmental Network is supporting a number of women's food-growing groups (2002) and Rycroft's (2000) evaluation of their Taste of a Better Future project, which encourages ethnic minority women to grow organic food on reclaimed derelict land, shows that women value the opportunity it gives them to break out of quite isolated lives, to mix with people from other ethnic backgrounds, to learn more about the environment, and to make links between the land they originate from and their new home (see also Buckingham 2003). Elsewhere, women, well established as grass roots activists on environmental issues (Seager 1993; Gibbs 1998; Buckingham-Hatfield 2000), are centrally involved in communal gardening and cooperative food projects (see, for example, Brimacombe's 1995 report on food-growing projects set up on housing estates in Salford and Bradford).

Table 1 Demographic profile of allotments in the UK

Survey	% Female	% Retired	% White British
Thorpe 1969	3	–	–
NSALG[a] 1993	15	–	–
NSALG 2003	16	40	–
LB Richmond[b] 2001	41	45	89
LB Hounslow[c] 2002	34	–	92
LB Hillingdon[d] 2002	17	60	88

[a]National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners.
[b]London Borough of Richmond Allotments Services Survey of Clients, June 2001
[c]London Borough of Hounslow Community Initiatives Partnership survey of allotment holders, 2002
[d]London Borough of Hillingdon – results of a survey of allotment holders in Hillingdon borough, Jan 2002.

Implications of change off the plot

As Freidberg (2001a 2001b) and others suggest, gender and sex differences are constituted in particular times and places, and notions of masculinity and femininity are imbricated with work practices. In large swathes of the Third World, subsistence food growing is practised by women, as it was in pre-industrial Britain. Rural to urban migration, the rise of the nuclear family, the wage-economy and compacted living arrangements have all contributed to a decline in subsistence food growing in the West, but where it has persisted it has been linked to masculinist leisure pursuits, fostered by practices which have encouraged a domestic gendered division of labour.

The rise of women participating in urban subsistence food growing has already been noted and, from interviews, questionnaires and analysis of media coverage, it appears that women from a range of socio-economic backgrounds are largely motivated by the opportunity to grow chemical-free food in an environmentally sustainable way, that is tasty, relatively cheap and frees them from the need to buy vegetables and fruit commercially. Such an activity, however, is time consuming: typically, the women interviewed spend at least ten hours a week on the allotment in the growing season. It therefore raises the issue of how this time is freed from other activities. Many studies

(see, for example, Townsend 1993; Waring 1995; Wickramasinghe 1999) have identified that women generally have less leisure time available to them than men; moreover, the research that has informed this analysis suggests that women plot holders are less likely than male gardeners to draw on the help and labour of available partners, although there is some evidence of collaborative working between women on the allotment (Kilbride 1997). Mrs H (Hounslow) was the only interviewee who consistently had the help of her husband 'I'm the real gardener, he does the heavy work', whilst others relied more on plot neighbours, friends and children. Ms R (Hounslow) has help from an elderly neighbour, Ms B (Hounslow) pays her nephew to do clearance work and reciprocates help with a neighbouring woman plot holder, whilst Julia1 (Richmond) does a deal with her adolescent son to help out in exchange for a barbecue.

Bhatti and Church's 2000 analysis of domestic gardening suggests that changing gender roles in the garden are encouraging a re-negotiation of domestic divisions of labour. Certainly interviews with individual women allotment holders to date suggest that this is a possibility, with respondents arguing that, in their experience, there is greater gender equality in their domestic division of labour, or that their allotment activities have resulted in their male partners undertaking more domestic tasks. It is notable, however, that the women identified have a different socio-economic profile to most male plot holders and are more likely to have a professional occupation, live in less conventional, and often not nuclear, households, and have some control over their time (for example, be self-employed). Any accommodation with male partners is therefore likely to be more easily negotiated. Although there no longer appears to be a clear relationship between level of education and environmental concern, those with higher educational attainment are more likely to compost, more likely to buy organic food, and more likely to be worried about genetic modification of crops (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2002). This is likely to be contributing to the embourgeoisment of the allotment.

A different kind of involvement of women is driven by poverty and isolation and is being orchestrated by cooperative endeavours, frequently organized by poverty action or environmental groups. This responds to women's traditional domestic role and status. For example, in East London, Bangladeshi women value the opportunity to grow food outside in a space from which non-related men are excluded, and have resisted attempts to allow male gardeners to participate in the project (Rawlings 2001).

Conclusions

The broad aim of this paper was to explore the 'feminization' of the allotment and the consequences of this. It is clear that there has been a significant increase in the number and percentage of women allotment plot holders since the 1960s, when baseline data for allotment demographics became available. Whilst there is some difference between the three West London boroughs studied (with Richmond approaching gender parity, Hounslow revealing a third of plot holders to be women and Hillingdon just under 20%), and all exceed the national percentage, the national increase from around 3 per cent to around 15 per cent in 35 years confirms this trend. The paper suggests that this shift in gender balance is likely to influence what is grown and how it is grown and that this is likely to have implications both within and beyond the allotment, both for urban food growing and the environment more generally.

Whilst this study is small in scale, the range of sources drawn on suggests that women do indeed garden differently to men, both in style and in terms of inputs used. Most particularly, they seem markedly less likely to use artificial herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers, which is likely to have an impact on both their own household's diet, and on the environment more widely. Whilst the women interviewed by this researcher, and by the journalists quoted from media reports, tended to be well educated professional workers, there is an indication from the secondary literature on community gardens that gardening style is common across women from all ethnic groups and social class and that this is reflected in the motivations women cite to get involved in food growing. Combined with the likelihood that education is no longer an effective barometer by which to judge a person's environmental concern, a tentative conclusion can be drawn that it is women, regardless of social class/education, who are creating an impetus towards more environmentally sustainable methods of local food growing. This would be consistent with data from agriculture, which demonstrate that women farmers, currently only 5 per cent of UK farmers, constitute 50 per cent of the UK's organic farmers (Poklewski Koziell 1999).

The second aim of the paper was to examine how far the allotment is a contemporary site for the reworking of gender roles. The incursion of women into food growing in semi-public spaces in the UK appears to be composed of two distinct socio-economic groups, although they share a number of motivations (for example, the desire to grow nutritious, artificial chemical-free food). On the one hand, economically independent women with high educational achievement and a professional background are beginning to garden allotments as part of a wider concern about the environment and the quality of food available on sale, whilst low income women are seeing this as an option to make a crucial difference to their families' diet, seen as inadequate nutritionally and sometimes culturally because they cannot afford to buy enough fresh fruit and vegetables. Interestingly, by-products of this new occupation, cited by both groups, are the freedom and satisfaction gained from coaxing a diet from urban soil. Other advantages claimed by, particularly Asian, low income women, who are more likely to be gardening collectively, are the social benefits which appear to be reducing the isolation they feel living in blocks of flats. In both situations, then, an incursion into food growing is seen as a source of freedom and pleasure in which women have appeared to engaged in voluntarily or even, initially, against the wishes of their male partner. There is some indication that whilst these 'new' women allotment holders, who tend to be middle class, well educated and with professional jobs, appear to live in households where their new activity has an impact on the redistribution of tasks, community gardeners appear to be adding food growing to their existing portfolio of domestic work, although the social benefits of community gardening are seen to compensate for the extra time spent. This makes it difficult to generalize about a wholesale renegotiation of gender roles, rather gender stereotyping is both undermined and reinforced in different ways, and that this potentially has a social class dimension.

Initially women working independently on allotments, and the different practices and strategies they employed (whether declining to 'double dig' and to use chemical inputs, or bringing their children onto the allotment) suggested a challenge to a male space that had partially been defined by its role as a haven away from family and women. However, in areas where allotment holding is in decline women are beginning to be seen as an asset, rather than as interlopers and are likely to be important in struggles to maintain and improve allotments. Consequently, strategies to increase localized environmental improvements (such as local biodiversity or an emphasis on reducing food miles) would be well advised to consider gender as a factor in achieving these.

Notes

1 Allotments are small tracts of land in the UK which are generally rented from a local authority for a nominal rent and usually worked by an individual, a family or small group of friends. A brief explanation of their history is given later in this paper.

2 The London boroughs of Hillingdon, Hounslow and Richmond-upon-Thames are on the outer suburban fringe of West London. Whilst all three are affluent boroughs, each contain areas where the percentage of ethnic minorities and refugees is high and have pockets of social-economic disadvantage. Interestingly, the borough with the highest participation of women on allotments is the most affluent and it would be interesting to compare women's involvement in allotment gardening nationally with relative affluence/poverty. This research does not claim to be representative of all allotments.

3 Quotation taken from an e-mail based survey undertaken within the yahoogroup 'kitchengardens' in preparation for an international conference on community gardening held at University of Nottingham in September 2000.

4 The Women's Land Army was set up by the Women's Farm and Gardening Association which was established in 1899, by women, to encourage training and employment opportunities for women on the land. This organization now trains women who wish to re-train or re-enter the labour market as professional gardeners.

5 See, for example, *Country Living* (1999) 'Allotted pleasures and fashion shoot 'Dig for victory'; Geddes-Brown in *Daily Mail You Magazine* (2001) 'The new land girls'; del Buono in *Guardian Space supplement* (2000) 'Do you dig it' and the Harvey Nichols store magazine (1999) (one of the world's most expensive department stores).

6 Yahoogroup 'kitchengardens' ibid.

7 In fact, this help is not always entirely welcome – my own 'old timer' male neighbour threw handfuls of chemical fertilizer over my carefully nurtured organic strawberries which he thought looked in need of some nourishment!

8 A health project in London Borough of Hillingdon is currently working with a group of single mothers to enable them to share allotment spaces.

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